

Antoon Coolen, 1897-1961 : biografie van een schrijver

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Summary

Antoon Coolen (1897-1961). Biography of a writer

Antoon Coolen was born in Wijlre in the south of the Dutch province Limburg. When he was six years old, his family moved to Deurne, a village in the middle of De Peel, the moors of Eastern Brabant. In a sense, it was a homecoming, since his parents could trace their roots back to that region. Deurne and its surroundings made quite an impression upon Coolen, so much so that they would be the setting for most of his stories and novels.

As a schoolboy, he was influenced by Hendrik Ouwerling (1861-1932), an older schoolmaster, regional historian and journalist. Ouwerling had liberal inclinations and was highly critical of local politics and the Roman Catholic Church. The young Coolen read many books from Ouwerling's vast library; books written by naturalists, modernists and liberals like Zola, Multatuli, Streuvels, Querido, Ibsen, Andrejev and Nietzsche. This was quite exceptional in the catholic atmosphere of Brabant, where priests sermonized to their flocks about the spiritual dangers of 'evil books'. After four years of boarding school (gymnasium) in Heeswijk, he left school in 1913 and had but one aim: to become a writer. In the first months of World War I, he wrote columns and short stories during an apprenticeship at Ouwerling's newspaper *De Zuidwillemsvaart*.

At the end of 1914, Coolen published a collection of these columns in his first book, *Opinies*. The book caught the attention of a 27-year-old student-priest, Wouter Lutkie (1887-1968), who offered guidance to the young journalist. This was the beginning of a long correspondence (from 1914 to 1922), which has been a rich source for this biography. The letters show how Coolen struggled with his first novels and stories, with his doubts about faith and religion and with his attitude toward women.

Lutkie was part of a critical but conservative movement in the Roman Catholic Church, the so-called 'Integralists'. Later on he became an admirer of Mussolini. Coolen's ideas, on the contrary, were, as we have seen, more oriented toward the 'Modernists'. He used Lutkie as a sparring-partner to sharpen his ideas during the 'Sturm und Drang' period of his youth.

During World War I Coolen was a journalist in Eindhoven, and then briefly in Maastricht. After some conflicts with the editor in 1919, he quit his job and left Brabant for a position at the catholic newspaper *De Gooische Post* in Hilversum. Finally, seven years and many frustrated attempts after his first book, he published a collection of short stories entitled *Lentebloesem*. However, the book's lukewarm reviews were a difficult trial for Coolen.

After publishing some stories in the literary magazine *Roeping*, Coolen became involved in the network of young catholic intellectuals and artists. Here he met Anton van Duinkerken (ps. for Willem Asselbergs, 1903-1967). Their first meeting was somewhat mythical: while shaking hands they uttered just one word: Brabant! That auspicious introduction was the beginning of a life-long relationship between the two very different writers.

In this early stage of their relationship they encouraged each other, but the younger

Van Duinkerken soon became Coolen's literary and religious conscience. Van Duinkerken saw the characters in the novels as bad examples of Brabant Catholics, and revealed this in his public criticism of Coolen's early novels. The relationship of the two men was like that of a twin-star: they depend upon each other for light and centering guidance. Van Duinkerken was afraid that Coolen was influenced too much by Nietzsche. Van Duinkerken was an apologist, a defender of the official Roman Catholic doctrine, but he was also a critic of the rigid hierarchy of the Church. Coolen's first aim was to be an author whose books touch the reader. He had no religious or ideological message. He was a witness of his characters and he shared their ups and downs in life, he had compassion for them.

With *Kinderen van ons volk* (*People of Brabant*, 1928) Coolen wrote his first best-seller. It was the beginning of a golden decade in which Coolen published a successful novel nearly every year. The earlier novels all took place in de Peel, the land of his youth. In these novels he describes the seasons, the landscape, and the work of farmers and peat-diggers. But this world is not simply arcadian and peaceful; the high rate of child mortality and unemployment in wintertime make life difficult. There were sharp contrasts between the simple happiness of family life and the jealousy and murder in a love affair. In the debates between an atheist notary and the parish priest, two very sympathetic people, the reader will recognise elements of the doubts from the letters of the young Coolen to Lutkie.

Het donkere licht (*The dark light*, 1929) gives an impression of the influences of World War I and the impact of industrialisation on young people in the villages around the city. The description of the suffering of Marie, a character who had an illegal abortion, has no condemning moralistic message in it. On the contrary: Coolen's look is compassionate; he has no need to condemn the girl.

We also notice this point of view in *De goede moordenaar* (*The good murderer*, 1931). Coolen describes the strange instinctive compulsion in a man to kill someone. The novel is devoted to the memory of the medieval painter Jeroen Bosch, and the devils, monsters and colours of some scenes evoke images of the paintings of the Final Judgement.

In 1929 Coolen married Gerda de Jong (1901-1964), a teacher. In 1931, 1932 and 1933 their first three sons were born. They were named for three famous Flemish writers: Stijn (Streuvels), Guido (Gezelle) and Felix (Timmermans). In 1933 the family moved to Deurne in Brabant, the village of his youth. They settle in De Romeijn, the house of Hendrik Ouwerling, who died in October 1932.

During his thirteen-year stay in Hilversum, Coolen wrote novels and stories that were set in the moors of De Peel. After taking up residence in the middle of De Peel, he chose another scenic backdrop: the banks of the river De Maas. His newer novels were inspired by Hendrik Wiegiersma, a village-doctor and painter. He told many stories about his Frisian family of doctors. Wiegiersma was an unorthodox surgeon, who attracted people from all over the country. His house in Deurne was a meeting point for artists and writers, not only from Holland but also from all over Europe. Coolen's novels *Dorp aan de rivier* (*Village on the riverside*, 1934) and *De drie gebroeders* (*The three brothers*, 1936) present a burlesque view of a village community and a doctor's family.

In the meantime, Coolen was member of the editorial board of *De Gemeenschap*. The informal leader of this monthly magazine for progressive roman-catholic intellectuals was his friend Anton van Duinkerken. The yearly Easter meetings were held in Coolen's house De Romeijn. Shortly after the birth of his fourth son, Peter, they moved to a newly constructed house, De Kempen, in Waalre in 1938. Here he published his last novel before the war; it would also be his last big novel for the next fifteen years.

Herberg In 't Misverstand (1938, translated by Jacobine Menzies-Wilson as *The Cross Purposes*, London 1948) was a novel with magnificent plot development and structure. In the end it turns out that every character is a completely different person from the reader's expectations.

The years of the Second World War had an enormous impact on Coolen's work and life. Already in the first few months of the war Coolen was offered to accept the prestigious Rembrandt-prize of the University of Hamburg. Like all institutions in the Third Reich, this university was completely under control of the Nazis. Just like Streuvels and Timmermans, Coolen was very popular in Germany. The Nazis used these novels as exemplary 'Heimatromans', novels that depict family life, the work of farmers and the strong relation with the land ('Blut und Boden'). Coolen refused to accept the prize. His reasoning was that he could not accept a prize from a regime that had illegally occupied his country.

In 1942 he avoided conscription as a member of the 'Kulturkammer' by announcing that he was no longer a writer, but head of public relations of a linen factory. In fact he had made a fake contract with the director, a friend of Coolen.

More and more Coolen isolated himself from the outside world. He stopped reading the newspapers. He wrote fairy-tales and kept notes in a kind of war diary.

In 1943, when the terror of the occupational power increased and raids were organised to arrest workers for the German war industry, he was asked by Dutch officials (the provincial governor and the national secretary of internal affairs) to apply to be mayor of his village, Waalre. This plan was designed to prevent the appointment of an NSB-mayor (NSB: national-socialistic movement in the Netherlands). When he, in the final interview with the German authorities, refused to cooperate, they stopped the proceedings.

In May 1944 he was forced underground when he ignored a call up for digging on the German defence works in Zeeland. His house was plundered completely by Dutch collaborators. While Coolen lived at various places in the west of Holland, his wife and children stayed at the homes of different friends in Deurne.

When the Allied troops invaded Brabant in September 1944, Coolen went back to his family. He escaped just in time, immediately before the northern part of the Netherlands was cut off from the liberated south. After the liberation of Brabant, Coolen's feelings were mixed. Soon, as a member of the 'Tribunaal voor speciale rechtspleging' (Tribunal for Extraordinary Justice), he was confronted with all kinds of people who had co-operated or collaborated with the Germans. He noticed that the 'little fish' got caught while the bigger ones escaped.

Soon Coolen was contributing to a new newspaper, the *Deurnesche Courant*, and began attacking Van Doorne, the famous director of the DAF (automobile industry in

Eindhoven). Coolen blamed him for his overly cooperative attitude towards the Germans and for collaborating with the German war industry. Van Doorne defended himself in another newspaper *Het Licht*. There would be a bitter press war in the small village Deurne for more than two years.

Coolen, who normally hated to operate in public controversies, could hardly stop this polemic. Finally in 1947 he ended the debate. It seemed to him that he had been going on for too long and that he had done enough damage to his own mind.

In February 1947 his youngest son, Peter, died in a tragic accident. Peter and a friend drowned under the ice of a well in the fields. Coolen had described a similar accident earlier in his novel *De schoone voleinding* (1932). The passage was printed on the memory-card that was handed out during the funeral.

Meanwhile Coolen became successful again as a writer. After the war he published his 'war diary' *Bevrijd vaderland* (1945).

In the same year he was invited to visit Czechoslovakia. His fame in that country was enormous. Shortly after Peter's funeral he visited Prague for the first time. In August he stayed with his wife and children for a few weeks as a guest of the Czech writers' association. However, the communist coup in 1948 put an end to these friendly relations, as well as to the flow of royalties from his books.

In post-war Brabant there were ambitious plans for social, cultural and economic development. The new provincial governor, De Quay, initiated a variety of programs. One of those programs was the printing of a three-volume publication, *Het Nieuwe Brabant* (*New Brabant*, 1952-1954). The book offered a presentation of the history, the present and the future of Brabant. Coolen wrote two essays about the landscape and the villages in this province.

At the same time he wrote plays for an open-air theatre in Heeswijk. These summer theatres were very popular in the fifties. Coolen had already written theatre plays before the war. It was the weakest side of his talent, for in a play, Coolen couldn't use his exceptional skill for compassionate characterization that illuminated his novels.

His short story *Incident in a Church* (1952) was a great international success and was awarded the World Prize for short stories in the *New York Herald Tribune* competition. Streuvels advised Coolen to continue with this literary form. But Coolen was bound to the great novel.

Fifteen years after *Herberg In 't Misverstand*, Coolen published another great novel, *De vrouw met de zes slapers* (*The woman with the six guardians*, 1953). It is a mysterious, fairy-like story about the relationships among people in a castle and those of a village. Here more than in his other novels, Coolen gives the reader a view on his youth in Deurne. The critics were divided. A new generation of writers had started to publish; authors like Van het Reve, Mulisch, Hermans and Anna Blaman described a completely different world. These later writers were more cynical and paid more explicit attention to their characters' psychological motivations.

Coolen lacked the enormous inspiration and energy he had when he was writing his Peel novels. He complained about it in letters to his friend Piet Oomes. There was also

loneliness in his marriage. After the death of their youngest son Peter, Coolen and his wife became more and more remote to each other. They lived in the same house but in their own worlds. The situation was reflected in some scenes in his last three novels.

In 1957 Coolen tried to present the development of Brabant in a literary way in *De grote voltige* (*The big tumble or rotation*). In alternating chapters he describes the rise of the son of a blacksmith to a famous captain of industry and a Maecenas of the village. It is clearly a portrait of his former adversary in the press war, Van Doorne, but it is written without bitterness or vengeance.

In his last novel, *Stad aan de Maas* (*A Town on the River Maas*, 1961), he gave a depiction of the influence of modern times on a little town during the construction of a bridge.

In the last year of his life, in February 1961, he was honoured by the University of Münster in West Germany. Coolen was given the Vondel-prize, a prize to emphasise the cultural relation between the region of the Lower-Rhine and the Low Countries. In the summer he was also awarded in Hilvarenbeek for his last novel.

In October, Coolen, who was very absent-minded during his last years, had an accident during a trip by train. Looking for the lavatory he opened the wrong door and fell from the moving train. He was lying on the side of the railway dike for three hours. His injuries were not that serious and he seemed to make a quick recovery. But a month later, on November 9th, 1961, he died quite suddenly on a heart attack.

The Guild of St. Anthony, the Abbot from Deurne escorted their protector to the graveyard and many Dutch writers attended the funeral. They all read the 'In Memoriam'-card with the closing sentences of *Herberg In 't Misverstand*, Coolen's credo about mankind and life:

"You ought not to love people because they are good and beautiful, but because you are their witness and their partner. And our earthly life is not perfect, but it is our earthly life. It blossoms and bears fruit, we cannot be sufficiently humble in our thought about this amazing earthly life. It does not depend altogether on fate, fate is a part of it, like the storms of the country. Therefore it is sensible to stand fast, with folded hands and to say with determination: So be it."